

Right & Wrong in the Contemporary World

PHIL 215 – Fall 2021

Syllabus

Instructor

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Office Hours ([on Zoom](#))

Tue/Fri 9am-10am
(and by appointment)

What Is This Class About?

Every day you are faced with moral decisions, many of them quite difficult. This course is designed to give you the tools with which you will be able to think about such issues more carefully and clearly. We will achieve this result by way of exploring a number of interesting contemporary issues. For instance:

- What is morality? Is it just something that we made up?
- Does our government have legitimate authority over us?
- Do all adult citizens have a right to vote?
- Should we open our borders to immigrants?
- Should recreational drugs be legal? How about the sale of human organs?
- Should procreation be regulated?
- Is it morally permissible to kill fetuses? Or the terminally ill?
- Is death even bad? Or, is it good that we die?
- Is it morally wrong to eat animals?
- Do we have a moral obligation to help starving people?
- What are our duties with respect to climate change and greenhouse gas emissions?
- What code of ethics should artificial intelligences (e.g., driverless cars) be given?
- And many more...

Throughout our investigation of these questions, the primary goal will be to make you a better moral thinker. That is, ultimately I hope to help you to (i) think more carefully and critically, (ii) be able to better supply clear and persuasive *reasons* for your ethical beliefs, and (iii) acquire some of the necessary tools that will enable you to further investigate moral issues on your own.

Course Requirements

1. Exams (35%): You will take a mid-term exam (15%) and a final exam (20%).
2. Papers (30%): You will write two papers. The first (10%) will be a short diagnostic paper of 600-900 words (i.e., roughly 2-3 pages), and the second (20%) will be a longer paper of 1200-1800 words in length (i.e., roughly 4-6 pages).
3. Reading Quizzes (15%): For each of the assigned readings (23 in all), you will take a short quiz on that reading before the week begins. Your lowest quiz score will be dropped; i.e., your 22 best scores will constitute your total quiz grade (~0.68% each).
4. Group Video Project (10%): In groups of five, you will become informed about one of seven controversial moral issues. Your team will then produce a short video about it.
5. Discussion (10%): You will regularly contribute to informal discussions about the material with your classmates, in an online discussion forum.

Finding the Course Materials

1. Lectures: Videos of my lectures for each week will be released every Monday at 9am ET on Blackboard under 'Video Lectures'. (At that time, I will also post written versions of my lectures on Blackboard under 'Lecture Notes'.)

For example, video lectures on the topics for Week 4, Mon 9/20 – Fri 9/24 (drug legalization and kidney sales) will become available Monday, 9/20 at 9am ET.

2. Readings: There is no textbook for this course. Links to electronic copies of the assigned readings are accessible on Blackboard under 'Readings'.

3. Reading Quizzes: There will be a quiz on each of the assigned readings. Find them on Blackboard under 'Reading Quizzes'. Quizzes are due by the *beginning* of the week during which we will discuss those readings (i.e., *before* my video lectures on them are released). Quizzes will become available on Blackboard one week in advance.

For example, quizzes on the readings for Week 4, Mon 9/20 – Fri 9/24 (Huemer on drug legalization and Radcliffe-Richards on kidney sales) will become available on Monday, 9/13 at 9am ET and will be due by 9am ET on Monday 9/20.

4. Papers and Group Projects: Instructions for the paper assignments and the group video projects are available on Blackboard under 'Assignments'. During the second week of class, I will also send out a link to a sign-up sheet for the group projects.

5. Discussion: Find discussion boards on Blackboard under 'Weekly Discussion'.

6. Exams: Exams will appear on Blackboard on the scheduled day under 'Exam'.

Course Schedule

Below is a schedule of the topics that we will cover, along with a list of the reading(s) which you should complete *before* the beginning of each week.

Please take special note of the exam and paper due dates.

UNIT ONE

Morality vs. Legality

Moral Duty, Law, and Government Authority

Week 1: Wed 9/1 – Fri 9/3

Intro & Argumentation

- Introduction to the Course (no readings)
- The Nature of Philosophical Argumentation (no readings)

Week 2: Mon 9/6 – Fri 9/10

Preliminaries: Disagreement & Morality

- Echo Chambers

Read: Nguyen, "Escape the Echo Chamber"

- Ethical Relativism

Read: Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"

Week 3: Mon 9/13 – Fri 9/17

The Problem of Political Authority

- Philosophical Anarchy

Read: Nozick, "The Tale of the Slave"

- Social Contract Theory

Read: Huemer, "The Traditional Social Contract Theory"

Week 4: Mon 9/20 – Fri 9/24

Voting and Borders

(On the Chat Board This Week: No-Platforming)

- Voting Rights

Read: Brennan, "The Right to a Competent Electorate"

- Immigration

Read: Huemer, "Is There a Right to Immigrate?"

Week 5: Mon 9/27 – Fri 10/1

Government Regulation

(On the Chat Board This Week: Gun Regulation)

- Drug Legalization

Read: Huemer, "America's Unjust Drug War"

- Organ Sales

Read: Radcliffe-Richards, "The Case for Allowing Kidney Sales"

Week 6: Mon 10/4 – Fri 10/8

Government Regulation

(On the Chat Board This Week: Religious Freedom)

- Parent Licensing

Read: LaFollette, "Licensing Parents"

Week 7: Mon 10/11 – Fri 10/15

Lengthening & Shortening Life

(Due This Friday: Paper #1)

- Euthanasia

Read: Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia"

- Life Extension

Read: Bostrom, "The Fable of the Dragon Tyrant" & "The Ethics of Life Extension"

Week 8: Wed 10/20 – Fri 10/22 *

Mid-Term Exam

- Exam Review (no readings)
- Take the Mid-Term Exam on Friday 10/22.

(The exam will be available on Blackboard between 6am ET and 6pm ET.)

* Fall Break: 10/16-10/19

UNIT TWO

Moral Obligation

Our Duty to Others and the World

Week 9: Mon 10/25 – Fri 10/29

Human Cloning & Abortion, part 1

(On the Chat Board This Week: Cultural Appropriation)

- Human Cloning

Read: Kass, "Preventing a Brave New World"

- Abortion

Read: Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral"

Week 10: Mon 11/1 – Fri 11/5

Abortion, part 2

(On the Chat Board This Week: Monuments)

- Abortion

Read: Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"

- Abortion & Infanticide

Read: Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion"

Week 11: Mon 11/8 – Fri 11/12

Animals

(On the Chat Board This Week: Reparations)

- Eating Meat

Read: Cohen, “The Case for the Use of Animals”

Read: Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People”

Week 12: Mon 11/15 – Fri 11/19

Famine

(On the Chat Board This Week: Uncivil Disobedience)

- Famine Relief

Read: Singer, “Famine, Affluence & Morality”

Read: Hardin, “Lifeboat Ethics” & Patton, “Game Preserve Ethics”

Week 13: Mon 11/22 – Tue 11/23 *

Climate Change, part 1

- Geoengineering

Read: Gardiner, “Is Arming the Future With Geoengineering Really the Lesser Evil?”

* Thanksgiving Holiday: 11/24-11/28

Week 14: Mon 11/29 – Fri 12/3

Climate Change, part 2

(Due This Friday: Paper #2)

- Procreation

Read: Young, “Overconsumption & Procreation: Are They Morally Equivalent?”

- Individual Emissions

Read: Sinnott-Armstrong, “Global Warming & Individual Moral Obligations”

Week 15: Mon 12/6 – Fri 12/10

Driverless Cars

- The Trolley Problem (no readings)
- Driverless Cars

Read: Jenkins, “Autonomous Vehicles, Ethics, and Law”

Exam Week

- Final Exam for section 01: Thurs, 12/16, 9am-12pm ET
- Final Exam for section 02: Fri, 12/17, 2pm-5pm ET

Additional Course Policies

Frequently Asked Questions

Answers to frequently asked questions can be found here: <http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/faq.pdf>

Two notes: (1) You are responsible for reading the FAQ by the end of the first week of class. (2) Please consult this syllabus and the FAQ first, whenever you have a question about the course.

Academic Integrity

All students of the College of William & Mary are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity honor code policy of this institution. Violations of this policy include: cheating, plagiarism, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, and stealing. All incidents of academic misconduct shall be reported to the Honor Council. More information about the honor code can be found at:

wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/studentconduct/studenthandbook/honor_system/index.php

NOTE: Students who are found to be in violation of the honor code will be subject to both academic sanctions from the faculty member (i.e., you will automatically receive an F for the course) as well as non-academic sanctions (which include academic probation, suspension, or expulsion).

Student Conduct

Students and faculty each have a responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment.

Those who fail to adhere to the code of conduct may be subject to discipline. More information at:

wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/studentconduct/studenthandbook/student_code_of_conduct/index.php

Disability & Accessibility Services

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability or any issue affecting accessibility, please submit to me a letter from Accessibility Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. More information can be found in the Campus Center (room 109), 757-221-2510, or at:

wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/studentaccessibilityservices/.

Religious Observances

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to reasonably and fairly deal with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments, or required attendance. Please let me know by the end of the drop/add period about any such conflicts, so that we can resolve them. More information at:

wm.edu/about/administration/provost/forfacstaff/holidays/religiousguidelines/index.php.

Discrimination and Harassment

The College of William & Mary policies on Discrimination and Sexual Harassment apply to all students, staff, and faculty. Any student, staff, or faculty member who believes s/he has been the subject of sexual harassment and/or discrimination based upon race, sex, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, religious belief, political belief, disability, veteran status, age, or any other category protected by the Commonwealth or by federal law should contact the Office of Compliance and Equity on the first floor of James Blair Hall. More information about discrimination and harassment can be found at:

wm.edu/offices/compliance/policies/student_discim_policies/index.php